

With the loss of architect Laurie Baker this year, Indian architecture is no doubt, feeling the void created by his absence.

Architecture+Design has collated a few images of this down-to-earth personality, who with his simplicity and humane approach, gave a new dimension to Indian architecture.



# Laurie Baker— the unseen side...



Late Laurie Baker

Benny Kuriakose

*"Isn't it a shame that there are so many people who have no access to anything which can be called architecture. We, as architects, highly trained professionals, are doing so little to meet this very great need. We must never forget that there are 20 million families who are sadly deprived, let alone have the benefit of anything called architecture. Not even a hut. It is to our shame that we allow these figures to increase".*

*Lawrence Wilfred Baker, 1986*



In 1943, while Baker was waiting for the boat in Bombay, to go back to England, he met Gandhiji, who said to him "You are bringing knowledge and qualifications from the West, but they will be useless unless you try to understand our needs here. The greatest needs are in the villages and for the ordinary people, not in places like Bombay." It was at the height of the Quit India Movement. And it was because of Gandhiji that Baker returned to India.

In 1945, Baker came back to India, to work for the leprosy patients. His main job was to convert old houses into modern hospitals. Funds were limited so he worked

Baker believed that music indirectly influenced his architectural thinking. He was brought up in the Western classical musical tradition, his father Charles Frederic Baker a choir master and his mother Milly Baker, an organist. He, however, did not agree with Friederich Von Schelling's well-known statement "architecture is frozen music". Baker likens Indian architectural traditions more to Bach's music, a favourite of his. He thought that Indian designs make vital use of light and shade.

"There is change during the whole day: the shadows change, the colour changes and the textures change. Bach's music starts with

### My Association with Baker

I met Baker in 1984, when I was doing my fieldwork for my final year thesis. Baker had come to one of the sites for his routine visit. I just walked up to him and started a discussion. The discussion, covering various things went on for some time, at the end of which I asked him, "Can I come and work with you for two or three months?"

His reply was "I do not ask my assistants to do my work. When I take only fifteen minutes to draw a plan, why should I waste an assistant's time to do a draft? I am not sure if I can make you any payment, because then I will have to add



1. Side elevation of the Centre for Development Studies (CDS), Trivandrum; 2. Entrance of the Thiruvalla church; 3. Entrance porch of CDS, Trivandrum.  
4. Internal court of Loyola College Women's hostel, Trivandrum; 5. Exterior element at the Thiruvalla church; 6. Corridor at the Loyola Women's hostel.

with laterite, thatch, bamboo and other low cost materials that were entirely alien to his erstwhile training in the Birmingham School of Architecture.

In this predicament, he found that the engineers and architects were of little help, and his answers lay in the indigenous buildings of mud with thatch and bamboo, and sticks and stones. Principles of construction are universal and applicable everywhere, but Baker working with these basic materials had to start to understand their behaviour, from the bottom upwards.

a basic theme and you can elaborate on it and you can encompass everything you want within that theme. With our buildings, we want housing, we want three sleeping places, where mother and father can sleep, boys can sleep, girls can sleep and we need a cooking place. And we need variations of these with simple combinations. We have different materials such as mud, laterite, stone, and bamboo. Architecture is normally an ordered set of rules of what is good, what is functional and what is sensible and in this way it is very like music."

this expense to the cost of construction." My answer was that I was not interested in any payment and I would simply like to learn from him. But finally, he did make the payment and my association went on for nine months.

I was the fourth or fifth luckiest person to work with him. Gerard De Cunha was the first, followed by Ramesh from Goa and Thomas from Kerala. When I joined him after finishing my course, he asked me to come to one of the sites. I was able to learn just by watching him work. He would



always answer all questions and he explained the various structural principles in simple language.

Everybody at the site, including the masons, *coolies* and carpenters used to call him "Daddy" and I also found myself calling him Daddy. Mrs. Baker was "Mummy" to all of us.

### His Life

Daddy used to call mummy "Koni". He first met her when she was a medical student in Faizabad in Uttar Pradesh. They were married in Pallavaram in Madras, in August 1948. They were supposed to be married in Hyderabad, but because of a

areas were acquired by the Army, the Bakers decided to shift to Vagamon, up in the hills of the Western Ghats, in Kerala.

Most of the buildings designed by Daddy between 1950 and 1970 are not documented. Some of them include Saksharata Niketan, an adult literacy centre in Lucknow, Noor Manzil, a mental asylum in Lucknow, some buildings in the Agricultural Institute, Allahabad University, a church in Azhakiyapandipuram, Tamil Nadu, office buildings for an NGO in Hoshangabad and the State Museum in Lucknow.

Daddy came to Trivandrum in the early 1970s. In Kerala, the trend of "gulf houses"

buildings designed in China, Germany, Peru and India in the middle of a desert, will you be able to distinguish them? Will you be able to pick out which one is from India or Peru? But at the same time the materials are different, the climate is different and ways of living are different."

"I always want to see, right at the beginning of our association together, their building site. Not only do I want to know what sort of a site it is (is the land level or sloping?) and what trees there are, but I also ask whether they desire a good view, a garden and whether they keep animals. I want to know about the water supply and from which direction the breeze and rain



1. Interior view of Loyola College Women's hostel, Trivandrum; 2. Chitralkha's studio complex, Trivandrum.  
3. Kerala style windows at Baker's 'Hamlet'.

riot, Daddy did not reach Hyderabad on time. During their honeymoon in Pithoragarh, a seriously ill young girl's life was saved by mummy performing a minor operation on her.

What was supposed to be a one-week's holiday became a fourteen-year one. They built a house and a hospital up in the hills where the Bhotia tribals were the original inhabitants. In the summer, this community would shift their residence to Tibet. The experience Baker gained by designing the ordinary buildings in those areas probably made him realise the richness of the vernacular tradition. After India's war with China in 1962, when many of those

was at its peak. These lavishly built houses were status symbols. But Daddy showed that there was another way of building or practicing architecture. He used the same standards in building for the rich as for the poor. He would say, "We have to look at the actual needs of the people of India today. To meet those needs, we have to stop thinking big and go back to the idea of 'small is beautiful'."

### On Modern Architecture...

Daddy used to say, "We should be thinking and designing as Indians for Indians in India." There is no Indian style of 'Modern Architecture'. "If you put

come from. And I have to always keep in mind that it is they who are going to use the building and not me."<sup>1</sup>

### Professional Relations

Daddy once said that when he came to Trivandrum, he was invited to give a lecture in the local Engineering College. He began by talking about the city and its architecture. They did not invite him for years after, because some of the buildings, which he criticised, had been designed by the professors themselves.

In the early years, the conventional architects and engineers were dead against the cost effective techniques popularised by



Daddy through his buildings. I remember an incident during the inauguration of a building using cost effective techniques in 1986, when a Government engineer publicly declared that this building would not last for more than a year. But Daddy's buildings done in the 1970s are still standing.

In 1972, the Government of Kerala constituted an Expert Committee consisting of Dr Kirit S Parikh (Chairman), Madhavan K, Alexander K C and Laurie Baker to look into a performance approach to cost reduction in building construction. In its final report, special emphasis was given to low cost housing because of the importance of housing in improving the social well-being of the people. A large part of the construction is done under the supervision of the

any drawings in his office or design any of the details. He thought it was wrong on his part to delegate the work to an assistant, because the client approached him for a 'Baker house'. He met his clients in the drawing room of his home. The drafting was done from a table in a corner of the bedroom.

"I see nothing wrong or unethical about an architect taking part in the construction of a building. You would think it silly if Picasso was only allowed to specify and give working drawings, but not be allowed to paint."<sup>2</sup>

He had no supervisors, no peons nor any accountants. He paid the labourers and the material suppliers directly. He never submitted any detailed bills to any of his clients. One of the projects Daddy did when

car back, with an apology letter to the mason. In his letters, he addressed them as 'Mistriji'.

There were no working drawings. If any of the masons or carpenters had a doubt, he would pull out his 'pack of cards', which were made up of the reverse side of wedding invitations and opened up used envelopes. He sketched upside down so that the mason could see the design as it developed. When clients used to pester him to finish their houses on deadlines, at times, he would be upset and say "Why can't they give me some more time to think differently?"

There is a belief that if an architect supervises the construction himself, he would be able to do only a small number of buildings. With all these constraints and



1. Entrance to the Centre for Development Studies (CDS), Trivandrum; 2. Front elevation of the Thiruvalla church.

Public Works Department and similar public agencies. Although many concrete suggestions regarding cost reduction in construction were submitted, none of these recommendations were implemented by any of these departments, although the political leadership under the then Chief Minister Achutha Menon was very favourable for such changes. Most of the recommendations made by the committee were based on the techniques and methods, which Baker followed in his buildings.

### Architectural Set Up

Daddy had no assistants, nor draftsmen. None of the people who learnt from him did

I was working with him was the IAS Colony for about 16 IAS officers. The final bill was settled at a per sq ft cost. A lot of interesting arguments used to happen. On one occasion, an owner argued that the area of the opening should be taken into consideration, in the case of double heights, because only a floor is avoided. While another owner argued that in his house, the plinth area of the middle row of the rooms should not be taken into account, because you should add only the cost of the roof and the floor of the middle row.

Daddy visited most of the sites everyday. One day he was angry with one of the masons, but after going home, he sent the

an unconventional way of working, Daddy had designed and constructed, in and around Trivandrum alone, more than one thousand buildings by 1985. This is in addition to the large number of buildings he has designed outside the state. There are two advantages of an architect going to the site. First, he does not have to make any detailed drawings, thus saving quite a lot of time. Secondly, he can see the building being constructed and can make any changes according to the clients' needs.

### Work Methodology

Daddy had not done many projects using mud as a building material. The most



prominent and the largest was the deaf and dumb school near Tirunelveli, using stabilised mud blocks. He used to say, "Mud is the material, if we want to solve the problem of our 20 million or 30 million families. It is a material, which is available locally and does not cost much, and it is low energy consuming. We are never going to build these houses with steel and concrete. If we are going to have houses for everybody, then mud is the answer."

He would answer the many criticisms on mud buildings. "It is not that I want everybody in mud, but I would like to see that everybody is in a house of their own. Most of the buildings we see in our villages are more than 70-80 years old."

In the 1970s, there were hardly any examples of sloping roofs or arches or *jallis* or exposed work or built-in furniture, all of which were very much a part of our traditional architecture. Daddy was responsible for bringing these elements into the architectural scene of Kerala. In the flat roofed reinforced cement concrete buildings, which were built in the name of modernity, you could hardly see the roof, while in the traditional Kerala architecture, the roof was the most prominent element.

"We have an incredibly beautiful country with many indigenous styles of architecture. No other country has this range of beauty and interest that we have. The most important thing is that we do not

or materials here."

Although Daddy came to Kerala in the early 1960s, his way of building and the various techniques he developed were popularised only after 1985, with the establishment of Costford. Costford was set up as an NGO, with former Chief Minister Achutha Menon as chairman and T R Chandradutt as the director. I joined Costford in 1985.

As part of the activities, it was decided to do three experimental houses in a remote place of Thekkumkara in Trichur District. Baker designed these houses. Thankappan's was with mud blocks, Keshavan's was with stone, quarried from the same compound and Prakashan's was with



1. Side elevation of the Loyola College Women's hostel, Trivandrum; 2. Sketch by Laurie Baker showing University College's Malayalam department.

On the availability of mud to build city houses he would say "Is cement available in the city? Are bricks available in the city? You have to bring them from outside. Then why not mud?"

"Beauty is all related to truth. A stone should look like a stone and a brick should look like a brick. If we use materials making use of their natural characteristics, the results from the use of timber, bricks, mud or stone itself is beautiful."

Daddy never gave any special consideration to the front elevation. As far as he was concerned, all the elevations were important. He always used to ask "Is it necessary?" He believed that beauty is not something, which is applied afterwards.

destroy this, we do not take away from it and we do not foul it up. We should follow on this tradition of creating beautiful buildings in India."

Daddy was passionately involved in the campaign against the demolition of historic buildings in the city of Trivandrum and elsewhere. "The Kerala traditional architecture is our own. We are not trying to conserve it. Once we loose this, we will never be able to recreate them. I am not saying that we should not have new buildings, but definitely not at the cost of the demolition of these beautiful buildings. I do not see any relation between the so called modern buildings and the ordinary life of an individual in Kerala or the climate

burnt bricks. When the construction reached almost the roof level, a two-day camp, on cost reduction techniques was organised in a paddy field, in a thatched shed, in the Thekkumkara village.

Daddy came to Trichur to lead the two-day camp. We had booked him an air-conditioned room, the best in the state government guesthouse. Once he entered the room, the first thing he did was to switch off the air-conditioner and open the windows.

This was in February 1986. For almost two days, Daddy talked about various techniques for cost reduction, in building construction. About 35 engineers and architects participated in that camp. Many of them later became the leading lights in



popularising these various techniques and concepts, such as Shankar of Habitat Technology Group, Jayagopal of Inspiration and Padmakumar of Laurie Baker Building Centre in Delhi.

Till then, Daddy was a one-man army. The famous artist and painter, Devan, was the only other person to do exposed brickwork and filler slab. But for him, cost reduction was not the main criteria.

### Relevance of Baker

Now there are many architects and engineers who follow in Daddy's footsteps. A concept and technology, which was there only in and around Trivandrum in the 1970s, has now spread to all parts of India and even abroad.

The relevance of these concepts and

techniques has increased manifold. Today, without giving any due consideration to the energy crisis and various other related issues, we continue to design buildings with glass facades that let in all kinds of heat. Then we become obsessed with air-conditioners to cool the inside. Baker showed that there was an alternate way of designing and building, without employing any contractors. He gave respectability to craftsmen and showed us Indians what is Indian in our architecture.

If the present generation of architects and engineers can answer the questions raised by Daddy, then there will be a positive shift in the case of our contemporary architecture. We will be able to give a humane touch to the kind of buildings that are being put up all over India? ✚

**Benny Kuriakose** learnt his basic architectural lessons from Laurie Baker. He worked for projects on cost-effective techniques in Kerala and became the designer for the public buildings in Dakshinachitra, Chennai.

*The quotes used in the article are from the notes Benny Kuriakose kept while he worked and learned with Laurie Baker in Kerala, from 1984 to 1985 and later, while attending the many lectures and workshops he gave.*

### References

- <sup>1</sup>Quote from the Internet article 'Of Architectural Truths and Lies' [www.hinduonnet.com/folio/fo9908/99080300.htm](http://www.hinduonnet.com/folio/fo9908/99080300.htm)
- <sup>2</sup>Cornerstone Magazine, Vol. 2 No. 3 September-November 98.

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